SPIDER-MAN® UNMASKED

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ROBERTO AGUIRRE-SACASA • SEAN CHEN • SCOTT HANNA • DAN KEMP

BACK IN BLACK 02.2007

The Sensational SPIDER-MAN®

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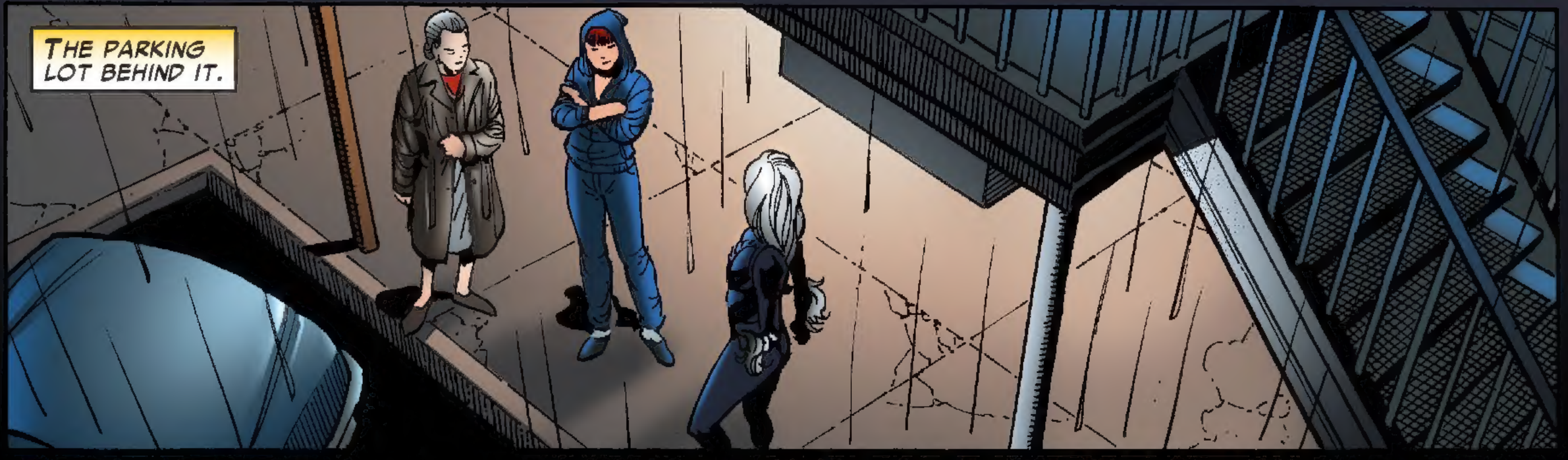
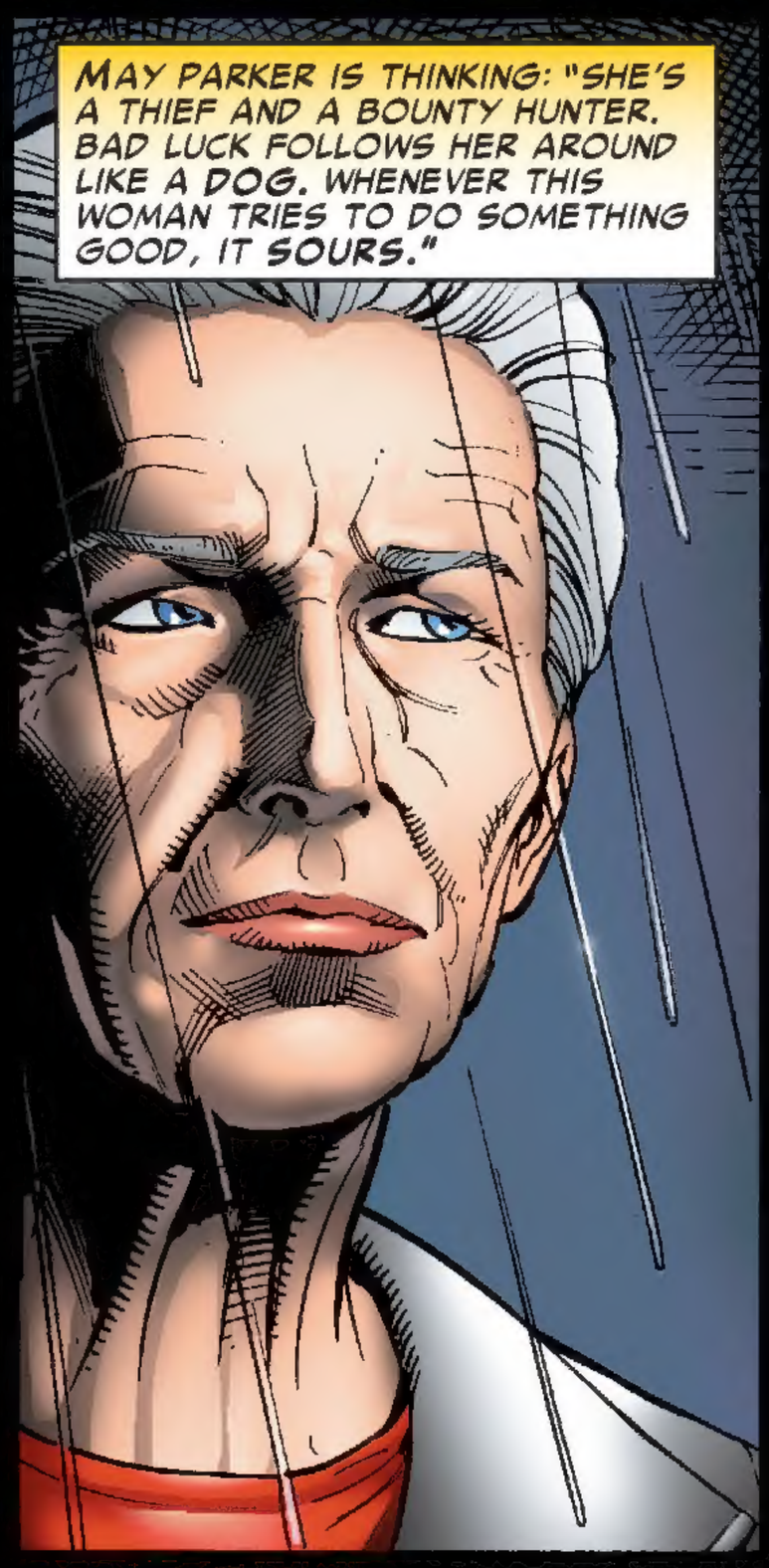
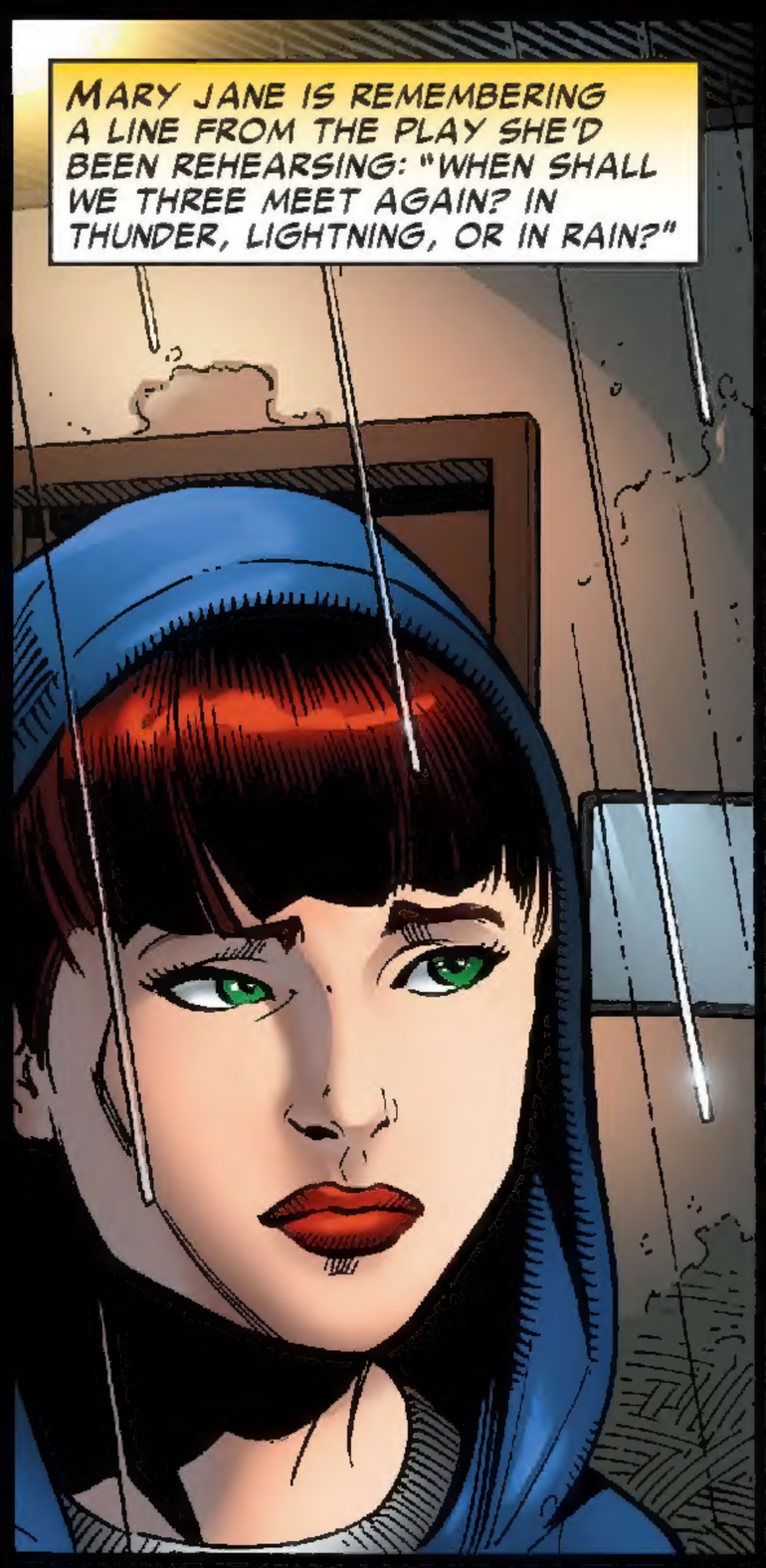
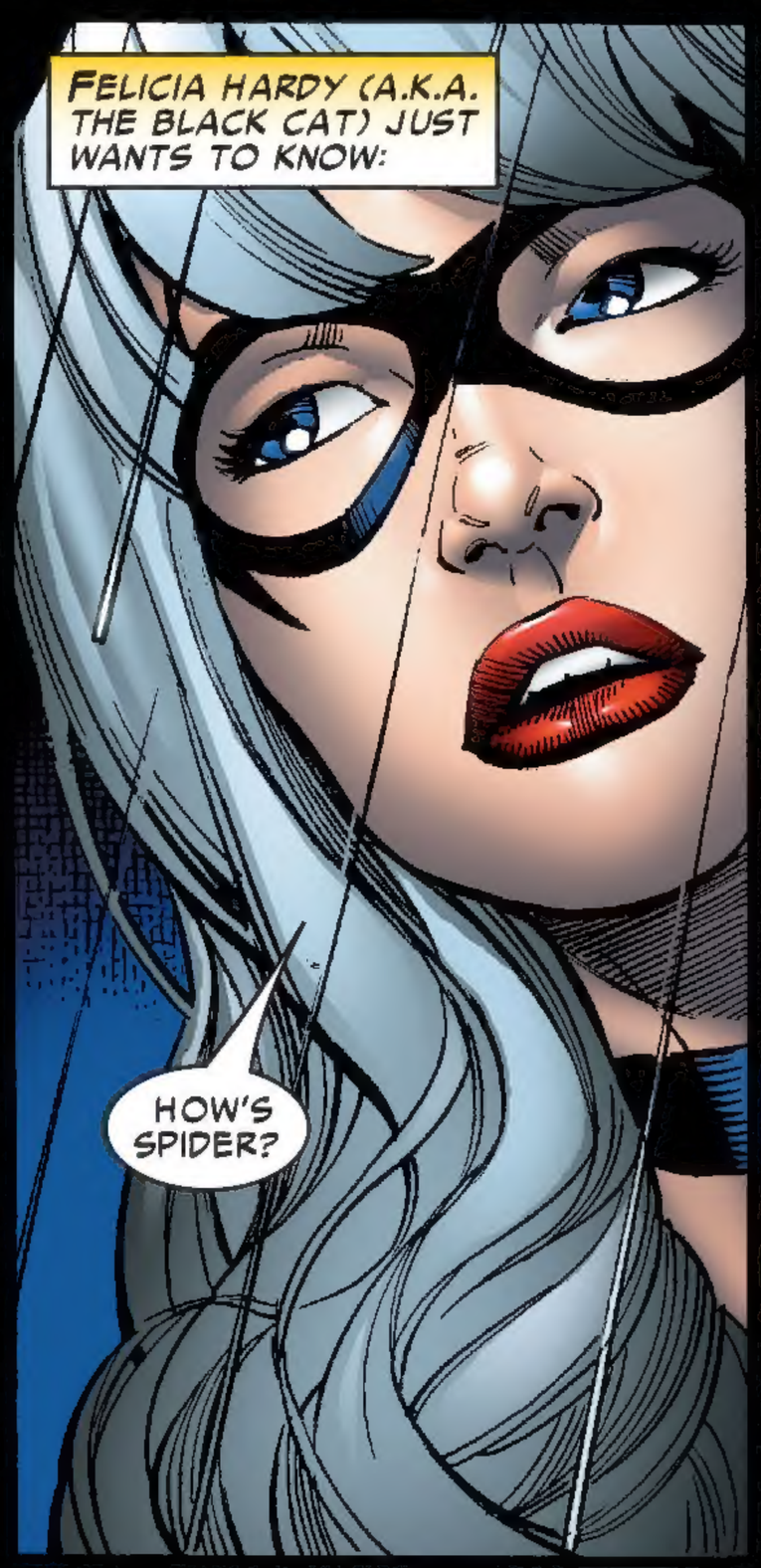
AC CABLE TV
VACANCY
THE MOTEL WHERE PETER PARKER AND HIS FAMILY HAVE BEEN STAYING INCOGNITO.


THE PARKING LOT BEHIND IT.

WHERE A STRANGE TRIO HAS ASSEMBLED...


MAY PARKER IS THINKING: "SHE'S A THIEF AND A BOUNTY HUNTER. BAD LUCK FOLLOWS HER AROUND LIKE A DOG. WHENEVER THIS WOMAN TRIES TO DO SOMETHING GOOD, IT SOURS."


MARY JANE IS REMEMBERING A LINE FROM THE PLAY SHE'D BEEN REHEARSING: "WHEN SHALL WE THREE MEET AGAIN? IN THUNDER, LIGHTNING, OR IN RAIN?"


FELICIA HARDY (A.K.A. THE BLACK CAT) JUST WANTS TO KNOW:
HOW'S SPIDER?

FINE, THANK YOU FOR ASKING. WE--*HIS FAMILY*-- TOOK CARE OF HIM.

DID YOU... SEE HIM ON THE NEWS?

YOU BET I DID, COPPER TOP. I SAW THE RHINO *PULPING* HIM LIKE AN ORANGE. WHERE IS HE? INSIDE THE ROOM?

NO, HE'S *OUT*, AND WE DON'T KNOW *WHERE*, BUT IF YOU'D LIKE TO LEAVE A *MESSAGE*--

MAY--

HE GO AFTER THE RHINO? LOOKING FOR A LITTLE *PAYBACK*?

NOW DOES THAT SOUND LIKE SOMETHING MY NEPHEW WOULD DO? NO, THAT'S MORE HOW *CRIMINALS* LIVE THEIR LIVES, ISN'T IT?

MAY...

...

YOU'RE THINKING OF ONE OF MY *OTHER* LIVES, MRS. PARKER. REMEMBER, I HAVE *NINE*.

ANYWAY, I'M PRETTY SURE PETER'S GOT *BIGGER* FISH TO FRY THAN THE RHINO... I'M PRETTY SURE PAYBACK'S NOT *HIGH* ON HIS PRIORITY LIST RIGHT NOW.

IN THAT CASE...IT'S LUCKY I'VE GOT SOME TIME TO KILL.

FELICIA...

...YOU SAW WHAT THE RHINO DID TO PETER. BEAT HIM INTO A COMA PRACTICALLY.

YOU DON'T NEED TO GO AFTER HIM, YOU KNOW.

OH, BUT RED...I WANT TO.

AND DON'T WORRY ABOUT ME. I CAN HANDLE MR. ALEKSEI SYTSEVICH. I MEAN...

...I'VE HANDLED WORSE.

NOT TO BE A JUDGMENTAL JUDY... BUT I DON'T CARE FOR THAT WOMAN VERY MUCH. SHE'S A BAD INFLUENCE ON PETER, I THINK.

SHE'S CRAZY, IS WHAT SHE IS. SHE'S ALWAYS BEEN CRAZY.

Go ahead and cut me down, you two HENS--

--if that makes you feel ***BETTER*** about yourselves.

Which God knows ***I'M*** all about.

Making myself feel ***BETTER***, I mean.

Hence, ***THIS*** baby.

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NOTHING CAN STOP THE RHINO

ROBERTO AGUIRRE-SACASA WRITER | SEAN CHEN PENCILS | SCOTT HANNA INKS | AVALON'S DAN KEMP COLORS | VC'S CORY PETIT LETTERS | CLAYTON CRAIN COVER ART | ALEJANDRO ARBONA ASSISTANT EDITOR | WARREN SIMONS EDITOR | JOE QUESADA EDITOR IN CHIEF | DAN BUCKLEY PUBLISHER

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I wondered about calling it my "*Black Cat Cycle*"...

...but then I thought: "*Naaaah...*"

Because, truthfully, what kind of ***GROWN WOMAN*** gives inanimate objects ***PET NAMES?***

FIREHEART? YOU THERE?

ACTUALLY, I WAS ABOUT TO ***PAGE*** YOU...

The Puma and I have fallen into a "*special relationship.*" (He's my ***MISTER RIGHT NOW,*** as they say.) The cycle and helmet were ***TOKENS*** of his affection.

OH? YOU HAVE GOOD NEWS FOR ME?

YOU'LL THINK SO.

THAT... IMMOVABLE OBJECT YOU WANTED ME TO FIND?

"WELL, I'VE HAD A *FRUITFUL* NIGHT."

"TELL ME--"

"MY FIRST STOP WAS THE JUNGLE CLUB, WHICH--ACCORDING TO MY CONTACTS--HAD BEEN APPROPRIATED BY *DMITRI SMERDYAKOV.*"

THE CHAMELEON?

EXACTLY. BUT THE PLACE WAS TRASHED-- AND WITH SMERDYAKOV IN JAIL, I'M THINKING OUR BIG GRAY GUY DID IT.

WHY?

WELL, THE CHAMELEON *HAD* BEEN WORKING WITH A TEAM. WORD IS, RHINO WAS *PART* OF THAT TEAM.

SO MAYBE HE TOOK PARKER DOWN AND THEN WENT TO THE JUNGLE CLUB TO *WAIT* FOR THE CHAMELEON...

WHO NEVER SHOWED BECAUSE SPIDER HAD *ALREADY* CAUGHT HIM...

"EXACTLY, CAT. WHICH WOULD EXPLAIN THE *BENDER* RHINO'S ON, LEAVING A TRAIL A *SIX*-YEAR-OLD COULD FOLLOW...

"KNOCKING OVER A *WASHINGTON MUTUAL* ON WEST BROADWAY...

"A LIQUOR STORE ON 7TH AVENUE..."

COLD BEER

FINE W

"WHAT? *WHY?*"

Sorry We're CLOSED

TO BLOW OFF SOME STEAM? TO FORGET WHAT A *LOSER* HE IS?

HE'S HIRED *MUSCLE*, CAT, NOT HANNIBAL LECTER.

YOU WANT A REASON? FILL IN THE BLANK...

"...JUST HIGHTAIL IT TO BATTERY PARK, BECAUSE HE'S HERE, AS *DRUNK AS A SKUNK.*"

BELLCHH!

Hannachen

WOW, HE'S A *CLASS ACT,* ISN'T HE?

I'M ON MY WAY; DON'T LOSE VISUAL--

"--AND IT'S JUST GONNA BE ME, BY THE WAY. *SPIDER'S* NOWHERE TO BE FOUND."

...

Add Puma to the list of people who think I'm crazy, after Red and May.

That's fine; they don't understand...they've *NEVER* understood...

...the *BOND* Spider and I share.

Seeing his beating on the news...

...hearing he was wounded and maybe even *DEAD*...

...it all came *FLOODING* back.

...Spider's fury...

...and Octopus lashing out at me.

The fight with Octopus in the Owl's *AVIARY*...

(With those *DAMN* tentacles of his.)

I had literally lost *PINTS* of blood...

NICE SET.

...I was at *DEATH'S DOOR*...

OF WHEELS.

Spider rushed me to the hospital, carrying me in his arms...

HELP HER!

FOR GOD'S SAKE, HELP HER!!

...and he...

...he sat with me, by my bedside...

ARE THOSE TEARS FOR ME, LOVER?

CAT--?

...until I came back from the dead.

Once you go through something like that with a person...

...you're LINKED forever.

MIXONA

Even...

Despite...

OUR RELATIONSHIP HAS BEEN HAVING ITS UPS AND DOWNS LATELY, AND I'VE BEEN DOING A LOT OF THINKING ABOUT US, FELICIA.

IT'S NOT THAT I DON'T LOVE YOU--'CAUSE IN A WAY, I DO.

Imagine my surprise. For once, I was on the receiving end of the "It's Not You, It's Me" speech.

Which took an unexpected turn, I admit, with...

AND THERE'S ANOTHER THING. FOR YOU, YOUR COSTUMED IDENTITY SEEMS TO BE EVERYTHING! FOR YOU, THERE IS NO FELICIA HARDY! ONLY THE BLACK CAT!

YOU WANT IT TO BE THE SAME WAY FOR ME. WANT ME TO BE SPIDER-MAN ALL THE TIME!

BUT THAT'S NOT THE REAL ME! THE REAL ME IS PETER PARKER, NOT SOME SUPER POWERS; NOT A COSTUME; BUT A REAL PERSON.

I'M SORRY, CAT, BUT I THINK IT'S BEST THAT WE BREAK-UP!

FINE WITH ME, MISTER PARKER!

Of course, now that he's revealed his alter ego, there's ***LESS*** Spider and more Peter than ever. (Which must ***THRILL*** Mrs. Watson-Parker to no end.)

BLEEP BLEEP

CYCLE, LOCK-DOWN.

FUNNY how that worked out for them...

And I wonder if Spider even gave it a second thought...

PUMA? I'M HERE. GIVE ME A LOCATION--

...what his ***WORDS*** did to me.

Hurt me more than any punch, any clawing, ***ANY ANYTHING*** ever had. Left me wondering:

WHO AM I?

And:

MY GOD, WHAT HAVE I DONE TO MY BODY? WHAT DID I LET THE KINGPIN DO TO MY BODY?

I was so worried I'd be a liability to Spider, so worried he wouldn't love me because I didn't have any powers...I let Fisk graft a "bad luck aura" onto me, like some mad scientist.

How ***PATHETIC*** was that? How ***NEEDY?***

I *HATED* myself so much in that moment, I...

...I wanted to rip *EVERY* stitch of the costume-- of the *CAT*--off of me.

Like peeling away a layer of skin...

Hssss

And *SCALDING* it away...

Until...

...there wasn't anything--

--anyone--

--left.

"CAT? 'LICIA?"

YOU MIGHT WANT TO *SHAKE* IT A LITTLE FASTER, PUSSYCAT.

I'M IN THE MIDDLE OF THE PARK, NEAR THE EAGLE MONUMENT, AND OPERATION RHINO'S ABOUT TO GET *MESSY*...

HOW SO?

SOME *RUBE SAILORS* ARE TRYING TO PICK A FIGHT WITH SYTSEVICH, IT LOOKS LIKE...

THE IDIOTS.

AH, FLEET WEEK.

THE *BEST* TIME OF YEAR TO BE SINGLE AND FABULOUS IN NYC--

FELICIA...

...I CAN ONLY IMAGINE WHAT *PERVERSE* FANTASY IS RUNNING THROUGH YOUR HEAD RIGHT NOW, BUT THERE WON'T BE MUCH *LEFT* OF THE NEWBIES IF WE DON'T *DO* SOMETHING SOON.

UNLESS YOU WANT ME TO--

NEGATIVE, PUMA! YOU'RE BACKUP, DON'T FORGET.

SIT TIGHT, UNLESS THEY'RE IN IMMEDIATE PHYSICAL DANGER.

OTHERWISE...

"...THE RHINO'S HIDE IS *MINE.*"

YOU A...A SUPER HERO? A *GOOD* GUY?

OR A *BAD* GUY?

'CAUSE ME AND MY BUDDIES... WE'VE NEVER BEEN TO NEW YORK CITY BEFORE. AND WE'VE NEVER SEEN ONE OF *YOU* UP CLOSE BEFORE.

...GNATS... YOU'RE ALL *GNATS*...

BUT WE SURE HAVE HEARD *STORIES*, HAVEN'T WE, TIM?

SURE HAVE, LUKE, ABSOLUTELY.

ABOUT HOW YOU *SUPER-FREAKS* LIKE TO 'CAUSE TROUBLE. HOW YOU LIKE TO HURT *REGULAR* PEOPLE LIKE US...

...AND THE *KIDS* IN STAMFORD...

...GETTA... GETTAWAY FROM ME...

...WARN... *WARNING* YOU...

US? YOU'RE WARNING *US?*

WHEN IT'S THREE AGAINST ONE?

YEAH, BUT DON'T FORGET, TIM. *ELEPHANT-MAN* HERE PROB'BLY'S GOT *POWERS.*

OH, RIGHT. I FORGET.

WHAT'RE YOUR *POWERS*, ELEPHANT-MAN...?

RAARRGGHH!!

...WHAT CAN YOU DO?

OH, $%#&--

CHOOM!

...WHAZZAT?...

AGGRESSION MANAGEMENT.

LOOK INTO IT!!

HHHN.

SCRACK!

GENTLEMEN. NO ONE APPRECIATES A GOOD TIME MORE THAN ME, BUT THIS *ISN'T* IT. GO TO YOUR SHIP. GO TO THE HUSTLER CLUB. HELL, GO TO A BROADWAY SHOW. BUT JUST--

--GO!!!

TRUST ME, YOU'RE SO OUT-GUNNED HERE, IT'S PATHETIC.

FUNNY...

...I WAS GONNA SAY THE SAME THING ABOUT *YOU.*

COME ON, SULLIVAN, IT'S NOT *WORTH* IT--

NUTS. THESE FREAKS ARE ALL--

--BUT I CAN TAKE 'EM! I CAN TAKE THESE FREAKS!

SHUT THE ⌀BLEEP⌀ UP, MAN, WE'RE GETTING THE ⌀BLEEP⌀ OUTTA HERE--

Good boys. Let the grown-ups play.

ALEKSEI--

--CAN WE *TALK?*

...

IF THIS IS A *TRICK*--

IT'S NOT. IT'S JUST...

...TWO PEOPLE TALKING.

(Two people who happen to dress-up like jungle animals, granted, but there are *KINKIER* fetishes out there, so don't judge.)

CARDS ON THE TABLE, RHINO:

I *KNOW* YOU OUTWEIGH ME BY A FEW TONS. I *KNOW* YOU'VE FOUGHT THE HULK AND LIVED. I *KNOW* YOU'RE DRUNK AND MAYBE NOT THINKING 100% CLEARLY...BUT IF YOU CAN *FOCUS* ON WHAT I'M SAYING, MAYBE THIS *DOESN'T* HAVE TO END WITH OUR *INTESTINES* SMEARED ALL OVER BATTERY PARK.

WHATTAYOU... WANT, CAT?

FULL DISCLOSURE? ORIGINALLY, I WANTED TO FIND YOU AND...

...AND *TAKE YOU DOWN.*

OR *TRY* TO, AT LEAST, AND DON'T LAUGH, BECAUSE I'VE FACED *WORSE* THAN YOU AND *BEATEN* IT, OKAY?

I'M NOT, BUT...

...TAKE ME DOWN *WHY?* SPIDER-MAN WAS JUST A *JOB*, CAT, AND IT'S NOT LIKE I *KILLED* HIM. (AND I *COULDA*... BELIEVE ME, I COULDA...)

I THINK...

...I WANTED TO *PROVE* SOME-THING.

...TO *PARKER?*

(Lord, girl, are you *ACTUALLY* having a heart-to-heart with the freaking *RHINO?*)

...

...TO *SPIDER*, YEAH.

HOW COME?

YOU GUYS GOT A THING ON THE SIDE, OR WHAT?

NO. NOT FOR...

NOT FOR YEARS.

(But what do they say about old habits...?)

THING IS, SYTSEVICH.

FOR AS LONG AS I'VE KNOWN SPIDER--

--SORRY, *PETER*--

--SO MUCH OF WHAT I'VE DONE HAS BEEN *FOR* HIM. TO GET HIM TO...

(Love me again? Respect me? *TOLERATE* me?)

AND PETER... BOND OR NO BOND... *DOESN'T* DO THE SAME FOR ME. HE HAS OTHER CONCERNS--OTHER *PEOPLE*-- IN HIS LIFE THAT TAKE PRECEDENCE OVER ME. I HAVE TO ACCEPT THAT.

SO...WE GONNA *FIGHT* OR WHAT?

NOT IF YOU TELL ME YOUR RAMPAGE ENDS RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW.

...

AND IF I DON'T?

IF YOU *DON'T*...

...THEN MY BACKUP, THE PUMA, WHO'S GOT YOU IN HIS SIGHTS, TAKES YOU OUT WITH A REED RICHARDS-DESIGNED BAZOOKA THAT'LL *KNOCK* YOU OUT OF YOUR HIDE.

THE HELL IS SHE TALKING ABOUT??

BUT LISTEN TO WHAT I'M SAYING: THE SAME WAY I DON'T HAVE TO BE SOME IRRATIONAL, SEX-DRIVEN, *PSYCHO* EX-GIRLFRIEND...

...*YOU* DON'T HAVE TO BE SOME EASILY MANIPULATED, LUMBERING, COMPLETELY *IDIOTIC* LACKEY.

...

GO HOME, ALEKSEI, WHEREVER HOME IS. SLEEP IT OFF. FORGET THE MONEY CHAMELEON OWES YOU. START AGAIN AND THIS TIME...START *SMARTER.*

(That goes for you, too, girl.)

HIC!

WHEW.

PUMA, DID YOU CATCH THAT?

YEAH, AND MAY I ADD? YOU ARE ONE *LUCKY* KITTY CAT, FELICIA. THERE'S *NO WAY* WE COULD'VE BROUGHT HIM DOWN--YOU KNOW THAT, RIGHT?

HMM.

DO I?

"I'M SERIOUSLY PERPLEXED HERE..."

...AFTER ALL THAT *BIG TALK*, YOU JUST LET HIM GO?

MAYBE.

OR MAYBE WHEN I TOUCHED HIS SHOULDER, I *PLANTED* A TRACKING DEVICE. AND MAYBE I KNOW THAT SOME-ONE WITH MORE *FIRE-POWER* IS GOING AFTER HIM NOW. MAYBE SOMEONE LIKE... THE PUNISHER.

WELL, THAT'S JUST GREAT. BECAUSE *HE'S* SO WELL-ADJUSTED.

I'VE SAID IT BEFORE, I'LL SAY IT AGAIN: I WILL *NEVER* UNDERSTAND YOU PEOPLE.

OH... WE'RE NOT *THAT* COMPLICATED.

WAIT, FELICIA--

--DID YOU WANT ME TO GIVE PETER A MESSAGE?

A MESSAGE...?

"You don't know what you're missing.

"We could've had it all.

"Would anyone else do for you what I'VE done for you?"

...NO, NO MESSAGE.

Except, perhaps...

...thank you, Spider--Peter--whatever you want to call yourself.

For taking your mask off and *REMINDING* me...

...it's *NEVER* too late to figure out who you really are.

END.